Native American removal is more than physical

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Listening to Native people's stories is one of the most important things a person can do, because it's one of the things that happens least for Native Americans, Mariah Humphries told webinar participants.

Humphries is director of parachurch partnerships and alumni relations for Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary and a member of the Mvskoke Nation. In speaking to Native American experience, she made clear she is only one voice among many Mvskoke and the even broader Native American peoples.

Don't assume one voice speaks for all, she counseled.

In her Nov. 18 webinar, "The Impact of Untold Stories in History: Exploring Native American Experience," hosted by Texas Baptist Women in Ministry, Humphries explained the *Brackeen v. Haaland* case argued before the U.S. Supreme Court Nov. 9. This current event has a long history, she said.

Brackeen v. Haaland

Jennifer and Chad Brackeen are white and members of a Church of Christ congregation in Texas. They are seeking to adopt the 4-year-old Navajo sister of the Navajo boy they previously adopted. ICWA stands in the way, however.

The U.S. Congress approved the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1958. The purpose of ICWA is to prioritize Native American families for the placement of Native American children in foster care.

If a family member cannot adopt, preference is then given to the child's tribal nation, followed by other tribal nations. Only when those options are exhausted is the adoption opened to non-Native families, who usually are white, Humphries noted.

Child welfare advocates long have deemed ICWA the "gold standard" for child welfare, she said.

Along with the Brackeens, a great-aunt of the girl also wants to adopt her. Here enters ICWA. In response to ICWA's limitations on adoption, a series of lawsuits has culminated in Texas, Louisiana and Indiana attorneys general and others challenging ICWA's constitutionality.

Deb Haaland, the named defendant, is U.S. Secretary of the Interior—the first Native American to serve in the cabinet and a member of the Pueblo of Laguna about 46 miles west of Albuquerque, N.M.

To understand why *Brackeen v. Haaland* is so significant requires going back to the late 1800s, Humphries explained.

Indian removal—physical and cultural

Along with the removal of Native Americans from their ancestral lands in the 1880s and 1890s, and relocation westward to designated areas called "reservations," the federal government established euphemistically termed "residential schools" to assimilate Native American children.

"Kill the Indian in him, and save the man," is how Lt. Col. Richard Henry Pratt described the program of assimilation.

Native Americans were deemed primitive and savage from at least the founding of the United States, Humphries said. To eliminate such qualities, the U.S. federal government, with the assistance of Christian denominations—including Baptists—ran "Indian schools"—408 of them in

37 states and territories, she added.

Native American children were removed from their families to be placed in these schools. Upon arriving, boys' hair was cut short—a cultural sleight against Native identity, Humphries said. Native children also were forced to wear Western clothing and to speak English.

In this way, hundreds of thousands of Native American children not only were removed physically from their families, communities and land, but also were removed from every aspect of their tribal nation and culture, Humphries said. At one time, there were 574 federally recognized nations in the United States and hundreds of languages, she added.

Many of these children never went home, and many of their families still don't know what happened to them, Humphries continued.

Most Americans knew nothing about these schools until mass and unmarked graves were discovered recently. With these discoveries, Americans are learning about the physical, sexual, emotional, mental and spiritual abuse that took place in these schools, as well as the forced labor, poor health care and neglect, Humphries explained.

Continuing removal

Overlapping the federal Indian school program was the Indian Adoption Project, another federal program running from the 1940s to 1967.

Once again, Native American children were removed, this time from the 16 Western U.S. states, to be placed with adoptive families along the East Coast. During this project, one-third of Native American children were separated from their families, Humphries said.

By contrast, ICWA "prioritizes the nativeness" of Native American children, placing them among their family, community and land if at all possible.

Should ICWA be reversed, however, more is at stake than child placements. Reversing ICWA is an attack on tribal sovereignty, Humphries warned. It would open the door to further attacks on tribal sovereignty, as well as open Native American land and resources to American corporate interests.

Quoting Harvard law professor Joseph Singer's assessment of a possible outcome of *Brackeen v. Haaland*, Humphries said a reversal "could have 'revolutionary, catastrophic consequences' for the relationship between Indian nations and the United States" by affecting "hundreds of treaties with Indian nations … still in effect."

ICWA's reversal would be "a continuation of removal," Humphries said.

Native American children may not be placed with non-Native families, thanks to ICWA, but Native American women still are being removed, Humphries noted, referring to MMIW—Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

According to Native Hope, a justice organization for Native Americans, "The murder rate [is] ten times higher than the national average for women living on reservations." At least one study has found spikes in violence against Native women correspond to the presence of "man camps"—temporary housing for extraction industry employees.

Not only do Native Americans oppose pipelines as invasions and potential contaminants of their tribal lands, but they also do not want the "man camps" that accompany them. A reversal of ICWA could make their presence on tribal land more likely.

Listening for trauma's echo

Most Americans do not know much of the preceding history, Humphries said. Their conception of Native Americans is frozen in the 1880s or 1890s,

she added.

“But we are still here. I am here,” she said.

Native Americans carry generational pain and trauma in their bodies, she continued, noting higher rates of suicide and physical illness among indigenous people than in the general population.

Today, many Native Americans are trying to reconnect with their families, their identities, their heritage and their culture.

Native Americans often want to be heard, because they’re dismissed so often, Humphries said. They are considered as “other,” different and unknown, and often are hidden from view and underreported in statistics.

Referring to how Western Christians often regard Native American perspectives and the assumptions often made about Native American political positions, Humphries said, “If we don’t agree with it on the ballot, we’ll probably reject it in our faith spaces.”

Rather than rejecting Native American stories out of hand, she advocates listening to the suffering and trying to understand the reasons for it.

Listening to Native people’s stories is one of the most important things a person can do, because it’s one of the things that happens least for Native Americans, Humphries said.

Disclosure: Mariah Humphries is vice chair of the Baptist Standard board of directors.